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VADE MECUM, VOLVENTIBUS ANNIS

THE MAYANS
SAN ANTONIO,
TEXAS

Degree 8 - 9

Number 144

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The Great Parable Series

PREPAREDNESS

THE TEN VIRGINS DELAY

EXPECTATION SLUMBER

DIFFERENTIATION THE BRIDEGROOM COMETH

NOT TRANSFERABLE



BELOVED CENTURION:

We come now to the fourth lesson in THE GREAT PARABLE SERIES. This lesson has as its subject - preparedness. It is my belief that, for the most part, you are familiar with the importance of being prepared for any eventuality in life, and for that which is to come; but, too often, we forget this important fact of life and allow unimportant matters to take precedence over that which is important - being prepared.

Surely we all know that no public speaker would dare make an important speech without some preparation. Certainly, no actor would step upon a stage without having prepared his part. No singer would dare appear upon a concert or operatic stage, or in a church choir, without rehearsal and practice.

In every walk of life, - in everything we do, if we are to succeed and be ready, there is a constant vigilance needed on our parts to be prepared and to keep our lamps burning.

Remember, life is a serious business, - it is neither pain nor pleasure; it must be entered into in a spirit of courage and self-sacrifice.

Someone, somewhere, has said we can never see this world in its true light unless we are constantly in a state of discipline and preparation for another state of life, and this is a truth which we must always remember - that this mortal life which has been given to us is given only that we may prepare for a life which is immortal.

Our life should be one of service. There is no real lasting happiness in any other way of life. When we fully learn this lesson and put it into practice in our daily life, we are well on the way toward successful living and preparedness. The great fact is that life is a service.

As your teacher, I would like to suggest to you that you do not measure life by the hopes and enjoyments of this world, but by the preparation that makes for another, and it is far better that you look forward to what you shall be, not backward to what you have been.

With these thoughts in mind, let us always love life, feel the value of it, and keep it filled with Christ. We continue now with further study of the importance of preparedness.

PREPAREDNESS. Matthew 25; 1-13.

THE TEN VIRGINS

WE will not take time and space to retell the story of the ten virgins here. You can read it for yourself in the sublime language of the New Testament, as you no doubt have done many times.

Please read it again before proceeding further with this lesson. Perhaps this time you will read it more thoughtfully than ever before. Always try to read inspired words with an inspired mind, so the meaning will be a real life experience to you, and the way ahead be made more clear.

Please read it again after you have finished this lesson. It is a good learning habit to reread and reconsider a lesson or a piece of literature after anything has happened to shed additional light on it. This fixes it more firmly in mind, imbeds it deeper in the understanding, and shows one better how to make use of it in his daily life.

The story of the ten virgins is one of the Master's longer parables, and it is richly worth every sentence it takes to tell it. We shall bring out several of its meanings here, but we shall by no means be able to exhaust its possibilities. There will be plenty of gleaning left for you to do afterward.

To understand any part of the Bible we must first know its setting so we can identify ourselves with the writer and think with him from his viewpoint. In this case, remember that Jesus is not merely telling a story about ten young women. He is making the point that when the new and better way of living represented by the Kingdom dawns one must be ready and prepared to participate in it, to be a part of it, or he will be so out of place that he will not be of any use to it and it will not be of any good to him. The door of its benefits will be shut. Any time a new and better condition confronts us, like a door we desire to enter, any one of us is like one or another of the ten virgins - either he is prepared to enter or he is not.

We might put this parable into terms more familiar to a generation that knows about lamps only from older people or the history books. Suppose you start on a very important journey. Knowing that you will arrive after nightfall, you carry a flashlight. The darkness comes, and it is so deep you cannot see the path. You throw the switch of your flashlight, and it does not come on. You have failed to check your batteries, and they are dead. You have not even remembered that such things can happen and brought spare batteries along. Suppose someone else is coming to the same place from another direction, and he has both checked his flashlight batteries and brought spares. He would arrive and you would not.

That is something like what the virgins in the story did, so each of us is represented by one or the other of them. Whether we are ready to meet the situation, test, opportunity, or privilege we seek, tells which group we are like. Now let us begin to think and live through the story by stages.

EXPECTATION

WE now begin searching the parable of the ten virgins for some of its meanings. Let us identify ourselves with the characters through the stages of the action. The first we will call expectation.

Here are ten people standing at the threshold of the fulfillment of a plan very important to them, a blessing they all expect to materialize for them. We all do in such cases, especially in youth. Some one of life's great moments is always at hand. Each one is breathless with the thought that she will soon be a part of a grand occasion for which she has waited all her life.

Most members of the human race stand at this moment before one door of hope or another. Each one has been trying all his life to get to that door. Now there it stands, closed and silent; but he expects any moment to hear the key turn in the lock. Then the door will swing open. What will the wonderful view on the other side be like? Will it be all of which he has dreamed? Perhaps it will be even grander. Who can tell?

The aspirant is so full of expectation that he may not stop to think whether he is ready for the experience. Has he forgotten to bring his ticket? Has he overlooked putting on the kind of garment required? Has he met every condition? Has he learned how to do what the new condition will require? If not, the moment of fulfillment is a little late to begin to prepare.

Do you find yourself somewhere in this picture? Have you not again and again stood at some door of expectation and possibility? Have you not dreamed, and hoped, and worked to reach it, and were you not thrilled with eagerness when you saw the door before you?

Perhaps it was the door of a new relationship in life. Perhaps it was the completion of a course of study. Perhaps it was a new position carrying a promise of the great possibilities you had wanted. Perhaps it was a contact with someone who held the key to success and advancement for you. Perhaps it was the door to some great and longed-for happiness. Life is a succession of doors. We are all standing before some kind of a door most of the time, but we are doomed to disappointment if we are not ready.

Of course, Jesus was talking about the door to the new world life. What have we personally to do with that? Everything. You do not live the world life. You only live your own personal life; but your personal life is a part of the world life, and your personal life affects the lives of others. Every advancement you make, every victory you win, in the quality and effectiveness of your life and work becomes a part of the new world life.

If we were all ready to enter the doors of opportunity for improvement, honor, rightness, goodness, and helpfulness, and if we did so, the Master's hope for us singly and collectively would soon be fulfilled. Be prepared to cross your thresholds prepared and unafraid.

DIFFERENTIATION

THIS brings us to the stage of tragedy for half of the virgins and for the human race. It is the differentiation between the ready and the unready to go forward to meet the opportunities and challenges of life - the wise and the foolish. In the parable they were equally divided. Can that be the proportion in life?

The virgins were all young women of the best intentions. They were all seeking to follow the path of honor and expecting to do so successfully. The difference was not one of purpose or motive but of wisdom. Some of them were wise enough to be ready. Others were foolish enough to suppose they were ready when they were not. They had not bothered about it, or at least had not been thorough.

Jesus attributed wrong motives to very few. Only those who knew the right and did not do it, who wanted to lay down the law to others without keeping it themselves, came in for his scorn. But he knew the great majority of people meant well, though some of them were not wise enough to do well. He forgave even those who crucified him because they knew not what they did.

That was true of the foolish virgins. They meant no wrong. They were eager and excited, and they thought they would be accepted. They had done what they supposed was enough, but it was not enough. They had made it too easy. They knew not what they did, but they failed just the same. No one judged or condemned them. They simply failed to meet the requirement. If one does not cultivate long enough reach he just doesn't grasp the prize.

This is a fact of life we simply have to face. The world is full of two kinds of people; those one of our American humorists has called "wise and other-wise", and each and every one of us belongs to the one group or the other. The wise know how necessary it is to meet standards. The foolish do not. Each takes the natural consequence.

The writer had heard sheep and goats contrasted so often that he once asked a stock raiser the difference between them.

"Goats are smart and sheep are foolish", he replied. "For instance, if a heavy rain comes up the goats will head straight for shelter and maybe get there in time not even to get damp. The sheep will huddle in a corner or against a fence, and get soaked or even drown, if someone doesn't go and drive them to the barn. I never worry about the goats, for I know they will take care of themselves; but I have to do the sheeps' thinking for them." You see, even animals are divided into those who know how to meet situations and those who do not.

You have come and will come to your share of doors of opportunity, doors to new excellence, success, and happiness. Remember that the road to each is a road of preparation. When you stand before one of them, do so as one who is ready, one who can meet the situation, one who knows what to do and how to do it. Stand before the door of your throne room as one who is fit to wear a crown.

DELAY

THE next phase of the story is a common situation too. It is delay. The bridegroom tarried. Then as now one could always assume that he would need to have patience, to know how to wait. Someone was sure to arrive late, and that someone might be the guest of honor. This frequent situation makes all kinds of embarrassment, but it also gives people more time to get ready if they would use it.

One of the things we might as well figure into the equation of life first as last is delay. The train of destiny always arrives on schedule, but the train of human action hardly ever does. The progress of man is like something operating on alternating current. It is not a steady movement. It is a series of starts and stops.

Do not assume that anyone or anything will be on time. Two of the few constants in this life are interference and delay. Some are not prompt and others are hindered and interrupted. Everyone has to endure it. Do not be irritated by it. Learn to adapt yourself to it and take it in your stride.

You can do that the more agreeably because the fact of probable delay gives you that much more time to prepare. It would have given the foolish virgins time to check their lamps if they had thought of it. Do not use delay as an excuse for being tardy yourself. That is bad for character, beside this might happen to be the time when everything will go on schedule. Be ready when the clock strikes, then if there is delay you will have time to improve on your readiness and stand all the better chance because of what otherwise might be unfortunate.

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE IN THIS MATTER OF MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE, AND ESPECIALLY IN PREPARING FOR THE BETTER WORLD ORDER. EVERY PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT HAS A TIME ELEMENT IN IT. EVERY WORTHWHILE THING IS DONE BECAUSE SOMEONE TOOK THE TIME TO DO IT. EVERY FORWARD STEP REPRESENTS AN INVESTMENT OF TIME.

Some of those who complain most about the lack of time, and insist that they would have made more of this situation or that if they had only had more time, are people who let enough time slip past them unused to do many of the things they dream about. It is like letting money slip through one's fingers. Time IS money, but it is more - OPPORTUNITY AND ACHIEVEMENT.

Do not be one of those who talk of what they would do if they only had the time. The secret is to capitalize even on delay, and catch and use the scraps of time that otherwise would elude us, perhaps while we are waiting for delayed occasions. They add up to enough time to do wonders.

David Starr Jordan, in addition to a life of busy achievement, wrote many scientific books, a long two-volume autobiography, hundreds of magazine articles, many poems, and countless addresses, in scraps of time when he had a little while of waiting or delay. He did this despite the fact that during forty-five of his eighty years he could not use his eyes at all at night.

It is amazing what can be accomplished while the bridegroom tarries, while the course of things is hindered, while there's a roadblock on the way of life.

SLUMBER

THE next stage of the action is a very quiet one indeed. While the bridegroom tarried they all slumbered and slept. The five who were ready could afford to take that opportunity to refresh themselves, but the five who were not ready were only throwing away their last chance to get ready. They needed the chance. They had still made no check on their preparation. If they had done so, the condition they would have found would have driven all sleep from their eyes.

Rest has its place, of course, and we all need a sufficient amount of it, but rest is not an end within itself. It is a means to prepare us to do more and better work. People should think first of creation, and then of recreation. Otherwise what is there to recreate? Slumber after one's work is done is sweet. In reverse it is only self-defeating.

In this parable sleep is a symbol of unconcerned nonchalance. It is the sign of overconfidence. But there is no place anywhere for overconfidence. The issues and demands of life are too important and serious to take chances by being careless, by letting our watchfulness and carefulness slumber while we wait.

In explaining the remarkable way in which John Bunyan made the best of trying and tragic years a biographer tells us how he arrived at the awakened condition of mind that gave us his immortal writing. He writes, "When one has looked down shudderingly into the depths, and has then looked up adoringly into the heights, he can be complacent no more." To five of the virgins their sleep was rest. To the other five it was complacency, which is always likely to mean defeat.

Bunyan's biographer was speaking of eternity, but we can say the same of all experience. Life is real and earnest, and the person who has looked into both its depths and heights ceases to be either flippant or careless. Duty is not a matter to shrug off, laugh off, or sleep off. Its portals of challenge have to be confronted, and when one comes face to face with the issues of life he had better not be rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

The Master in Gethsemane, facing his tragic climax and wrestling with all the powers of defeat, kept coming back to speak with his disciples and each time finding them asleep. That is, all but one. Judas Iscariot was back in town, wide awake and very busy bargaining on the great betrayal. Evil was awake. Only goodness slumbered. The goat and the sheep! Had the other eleven been as alert as Judas, how different things might have been!

Be alert wherever you are. If you drag listlessly in a don't care or what's the use? attitude, your great opportunities may pass you by without your ever knowing it. Let the warning word of the Master - WATCH - be engraved in the deeper chambers of your mind. See your opportunities as they come and be in a condition of mind to do something about them.

Earn your sleep before you take it by being prepared to enter any good door of promise that might open to you tomorrow - or even today.

THE BRIDEGROOM COMETH

WAITING is not forever. The hour was midnight, but the bridegroom finally came. Soon or late the hour of climax and fulfillment appears. The great moment arrives, and when it does, we are grateful that we have not grown impatient and given up the watch.

That hour of realization brings everything into clear focus. It makes the status of each watcher definite and final. It is a glad time for the wise who are ready, but a very bitter one for everyone else. Uncertainty is all gone now. One more thing has come to judgment. For all concerned a decision without appeal is ready to be handed down.

No one has to classify us, and put some of us on the right hand and some on the left. We do it ourselves. There is no way now to conceal whether we are ready or not. We must take our places, whatever we have made them.

The first chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Colossians has a significant phrase about God having made us meet - or fit - to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. We have to be fit to be inheritors of anything, and we ourselves are responsible for that fitness.

Suppose you are invited to a great banquet, and you arrive there in a nauseated condition. You cannot even look at the food in peace. It is a poor place to go unprepared.

Suppose you accept an opportunity to visit a distant land, you seize it eagerly, for you have long wanted to go there. When you arrive you find that you were not prepared to come. You know nothing of the history, customs, or language of the people. So you go home in disappointment, having gained nothing. That is what happens when we come to anything, however desired, and are not ready for it.

St. Paul's Colossian letter hints that even the Kingdom life, perhaps even heaven itself would not be a happy situation for us if we had not been made fit by the growth and acclimatization necessary to make the most of them. We have to be ready if these or any situations are to be congenial to us.

Schools everywhere are training young people in engineering, languages, applied sciences, agriculture, even in diplomacy. Why? Because doors of opportunity will stand before them some day, and it is important for them to be ready to enter when the doors open. The same is true for all ages and conditions of us.

Do not live a dull and empty life. Take an interest in things. Learn every interesting fact and worthwhile truth you can. Make a friend whenever you have a chance. You never know when you will need them or how good it will be to have them. Cultivate every ability you have. Tomorrow or some other day it may be your making.

Observe. Think. Keep your mind in working order. Do the same with your soul. Many a person is strong to meet a need or grasp an opportunity because through the years he has kept "prayed up" for just such an hour.

Remember, no matter how long you wait for your moment, it will come. The bridegroom finally arrived, and so will your great chance. But to be ready for it means to be making the best of these workaday hours right now. Then when the shout goes up that your day has come, you will be ready for it.

NOT TRANSFERABLE

NOW let us look at the moment of climax in the parable - so happy for some, so tragic for others. The virgins who have not prepared themselves by having plenty of oil in their lamps are dismayed. They try to beg some from those who have been more provident, but in vain. They rush out to buy, but when they get back the door is closed. The moment of opportunity has passed.

It is not only necessary to have the equipment for meeting important needs, opportunities, and testing times. It is equally necessary to have it ready for use at the right time. We may have to wait for history, but history will not wait for us. Many a great possibility has been lost because someone was not ready, or because he got ready too late. The iron must be struck while it glows red on the anvil. It is useless to flail it with the hammer when it has begun to cool.

It is a favorite custom of sophists and quibblers to blame the wise virgins for not sharing their oil with the foolish ones. It does not show a good spirit, they say, and it is clear that the virgins were not merely wise but also selfish.

Those who talk so do not understand what it is all about. If Jesus had really been talking about oil there might be some point to their claim, but he was talking about the qualities of the ready life, and they are not transferable. One has them only if he has acquired them. There is no other way of getting them. So, naturally, they could not share their oil (their good qualities).

Once a man was given a ticket to a concert in Carnegie Hall. Arriving at the door he found that he had not brought it with him. He began to think he knew how the foolish virgins must have felt. Fortunately he was provided with another ticket, but in most of the crises of life if we are not prepared that is that. The admission tickets of fate have no duplicates.

The great lesson in all this is to take no chances, and not to expect some stroke of luck to get us through the door of privilege at the last moment. Depending on luck is not wisdom anyway. It is too artificial, intermittent, and uncertain.

The magic secret is to live the kind of life that will keep you ready for the high moments that now and then come within reach of everyone. Begin early - no later than today. Strengthen your mind, cultivate your powers, keep watch over your heart, sharpen your spiritual perceptions, and DO THESE THINGS EVERY DAY YOU LIVE. Do not be like a man going confidently into the woods with an axe he is sure will be sharp because he ground it ten years before. We must be vigilant always. There is an old saying among people in the world of moving

pictures, "An actor or actress is as good as his or her most recent picture." They can make 99 good ones and be greatly admired, but if the most recent one they make is not up to standard, they begin slipping down the ladder of fame to oblivion, and so it is in all of life. Never stop trying - always give your best. Be always prepared.

Preparedness is the joyful way too. It gives the satisfaction of real assurance that whatever comes, you will be able to meet it with your best. Think it over, and resolve that whatever doors of possibility confront you, or when it may be, you will have your lamp trimmed and burning.

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As we bring this lesson on Preparedness to a close, in order that your life may be happier and your preparation more complete, keep this thought in mind:

"If you love life, do not squander time for that is what life is made of."

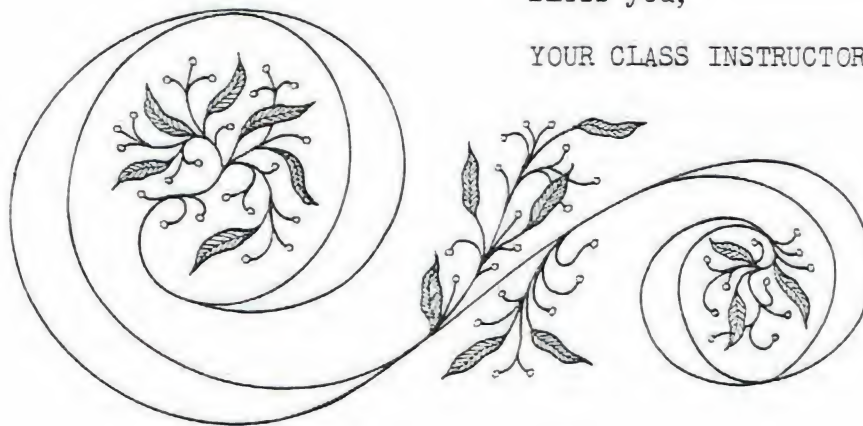
And now, let us say the following Prayer together:

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, show me how to prepare my life - mind, heart, soul, and body - to meet the challenges of life, that when doors of opportunity open, I will not be away trying to get ready to pass through them. Amen.

Bless you,

YOUR CLASS INSTRUCTOR.



The next lesson in this series is WORKING CAPITAL, Matt. 25:14-30, and in it we will study the following subjects:

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS
OUR ENDOWMENT
ACCOUNTING TIME
THE SUCCESSES

THE MAN WHO DIDN'T TRY
TO HIM THAT HATH
A SHIFT OF CHARACTER
PRAYER

